

### **Instant Irfan: No-Nonsense Gnosis**

Between the spiritual and the secular, when regarded as two common ways of trying to make sense of human thought and action, it is usually presumed that one, the spiritual, has more to do with God, angels, and the unseen, and that its purpose is to help figure out how all such things influence man's actions and help to kindle virtues within him.

As for the other, the secular, it is presumed to focus more on the physical nature of man, and the choices that he makes in his actions and interactions with others, as well as with his environment, but without him being bogged down by "controlling" or "restricting" factors like God and religion; However, just how well does the second way, the secular approach, actually hold up to its reputation as a God-free, anti-spiritual approach, particularly in light of the Holy Quran, and the teachings of our Infallible Masoomeen ؑ?

In an attempt to answer this question, we will take a quick look at the ideas that are postulated in metaphysics, a field of philosophy to which secular-minded people turn to help make sense of the reality of human existence, and human experience. Once we have examined these ideas, we will then compare them to what the Holy Quran and our Masoomeen ؑ say in this regard.

In metaphysics, the study of reality, as experienced by man, is called existentialism. Of the many ideas that have been developed in the field of existentialism, one very prominent idea is that of Dasein.

In short, the idea of Dasein begins by "clearing the table" of all things that can be or become objects of thought or action, and then goes on to re-examine the underlying meaning in the context of an individual's interactions based solely in his will and desire to act, ie. based on man's volition.

For example, suppose there is a desk with a piece of paper and a pen on it. It is understood that all three of these objects are resting there, together, in their respective places; However, it is only when a human being enters, sits at that desk, picks up that pen, and begins to write with it on that piece of paper, that existentialists consider him a "Being writing." When this happens, and only when it happens, do existentialists say that any true meaningfulness involving all of those objects, including the human, has taken place.

Otherwise, they say that, on their own, the desk, the paper, the pen, and the human, although they are all real, and although they are all objects, they do not have any higher degree of meaningfulness other than as simple, distinct objects. This is the idea contained in the existentialist term Dasein, which is a German word meaning "existing"; "being there." But, Dasein does not just mean the simple presence or appearance of a human being found amongst a group of disparate objects. To fully understand the implications of Dasein, and the deeper way in which it relates the desk, paper, pen, and the human in the above example, one has to get a very specific grasp of the concept of Dasein; of the notion of "being there."

Understanding Dasein, in the way that existentialists do, means one has to first come to terms with the idea that, in daily life, the focus of conversations, of ideas, and of actions is always on some thing, like on an object, or on an idea; There is no conversation, idea, or action that takes place without a "something" either on, about, or at, which it is directed.

This necessity to always have a subject or object about which, or on which, or at which a conversation, idea, or action is directed, according to what existentialists say, is what gets in the way of discovering the full true meaning of human existence and human experience; of understanding Dasein.

What's more is that these people also say, to really get the full picture of reality, i.e. of human existence and experience, one has to break their bad habits and not only stop always focusing on a "something," but they also have to come to terms with the larger fact, and recognize that there also exists a "nothing," too, in spite of any apprehensions and anxiety that they may feel in doing so.

Essentially, this means that one has to let go of their tendency to always focus on an object or an idea, in the most philosophical way possible, such that they will realize that it is human volition which becomes the picture frame from inside of which meaningfulness and context occur.

For example, going back to the desk, paper, and pen example, we can ask: what is the meaning and context that connects all of them together? The answer: the connection is a byproduct of the human volition to interact with those objects.

There is no meaningfulness in those objects until a human enters and starts interacting with them by way of his volition to interact with those objects, which then creates the picture frame inside of which meaningfulness and context occur: if the human wraps the pen in the paper on the desk, the meaning and context that occur within that picture frame are that of the Dasein: "Being wrapping (a present)."

But, if he, instead, writes on the paper with the pen, then the meaning and context that occur in that picture frame are of the Dasein: "Being writing (an essay/note/poem/etc)". In both instances, the human is Dasein: "being there." All of what has been said so far, however, is only half of the existentialist's big picture of how they define Dasein.

As mentioned above, one has to break their bad habits and, in spite of any apprehensions and anxiety that they may feel in doing so, they have to stop always trying to focus on a “something,” and they have to come to terms with the larger fact that there also exists a “nothing,” too.

So, to appreciate the “Being writing,” or the “Being wrapping” situation even more, one needs to begin by “clearing the table” of all things that can be or become objects of thought, etc., and re-examine everything in the context of Dasein: “being there.” So, let us now do that.

Begin by removing the pen from the above-mentioned scene, followed by removing the paper, and then the desk. What is left?

Just the human being: the object that provides the volition, which provides the frame work for the meaning and context that occur, as regards the Dasein. What else still remains there along with him?

The room in which that desk was, in a house, on a city block, in a city, in a country, on the planet earth, in the solar system, in the galaxy, in the universe, in the fabric of spacetime, on a dimensional brane. Eliminate them all.

What is left?

The black void of empty space? Emptiness itself?

Eliminate that also.

What is left now?

Nothing.

Is there anything else?

Yes.

You.

You are there along with, as existentialist philosophers would say, “the Nothing.”

In the above exercise, this entire time, as you went through the list of objects that were eliminated, you were Dasein: “Being reading,” and you still continue to be so. Your volition to read provides the picture frame that allows meaning and context to occur within it, in terms of what is happening, as it happens. So now, right at this moment, according to existentialist philosophical thought, there are just two things left:

You, as Dasein, and “the Nothing.”

A point to note here, as mentioned before, is to break your habit of wanting to look at a “something,” and to (philosophically) come to terms with, and to face “the Nothing,” in spite of any apprehensions and anxiety that you may feel at the thought of having to face it. You must face the fact that you are Dasein: “Being surrounded by ‘the Nothing.’”

In their quest to find meaning in human existence and experience, this situation is what existentialists conclude to be the pinnacle of their philosophical/metaphysical examination of human existence and experience. At this point, after having reached this (philosophical, metaphysical, existential) peak of revelation along with the existentialists, something beautiful happens when, as Muslims, we bring the teachings of the Holy Quran and the Masoomeen ﷺ into the mix.

First, we have to recall that, with the above argument so far, we have eliminated all possible things that can become subjects or objects of conversations, ideas, or actions, and, in their place, per the opinion of existentialist philosophers, all we have left are you, the Dasein, and the Nothing.

Well, what do the Holy Quran and the Masoomeen ﷺ say about what is left once all [creations مخلوقات] of Allah ﷺ have been destroyed, and cease to exist?

Amir al-Moomineen Ali ibn Abi Talib ﷺ taught Kumail, the son of Ziyad, a prayer which has since become known as Dua-e-Kumail. It is a very well-known prayer that is recited on Thursday nights in all Shia mosques and centres of worship around the world, and through it believers beseech Allah ﷺ for His blessings and forgiveness. The verses of this prayer are very heartfelt and moving; among them we find the following verse, addressing Allah ﷺ as:

يا اول الاولين ويا اخر الاخرين

Which corresponds to the English equivalent:

The Alpha and the Omega.

The idea here, in both the Arabic and English verses above, clearly, is that Allah ﷺ, God, the Sublime, is:

The First to Exist, before anything else ever existed, and the Last to Remain, after everything else ceases to exist.

And, if we turn to the Holy Quran Ch. 2, verse 115, it says:

...and wherever you turn there is Allah's face (presence); for verily, Allah is All-pervading and All-Knowing...

Together, through both Dua-e-Kumail and the Holy Quran, it becomes clear, to Muslims, that there is no such thing as "the Nothing," per what the existentialists propose the Dasein encounters, because "the Last to remain, after everything else ceases to exist," "the Omega," is Allah ﷺ, alone.

It is important to take note that, in spite of the academic rigour that secular existentialists put into arriving at "the Nothing," critics of metaphysics, and of philosophy in general, dismiss all philosophical notions by saying that, at the end of the day, these are just thoughts and ideas that circulate within a very specific group of "enthusiasts" as a means to try to help make sense of human existence and experience, and that there is nothing more special or grand about any the ideas philosophers propose; that there is no practical value to what comes out of philosophy because it only examines ideas. Even secular-minded people acknowledge this sentiment.

However, because we have now brought the Holy Quran and the Masoomeen ﷺ into the conversation, and thereby commanded what was, at the start, a secular existential examination, we will now further see if the secular approach holds up to its reputation in light of the Holy Quran, and the teachings of our Infallible Masoomeen ﷺ.

In the book series Bihar al-Anwar, we come across the following passage, attributed to Imam Hasan ﷺ, our 2nd Imam:

وأما عشرة أشياء بعضها أشد من بعض فأشد شيء خلق الله الحجر وأشد منه الحديد يقطع به الحجر، وأشد من النار الماء، وأشد من الماء السحاب، وأشد من السحاب الريح تحمل السحاب وأشد من الريح الملك الذي يردها، وأشد من الملك ملك الموت الذي يميت الملك الموت، وأشد من الموت أمر الله الذي يدفع الموت.

بحار الأنوار - العلامة المجلسي - vol 43 p. 326

The backstory to the narration above is that a man, in his search for the truth, came to the Imam ﷺ and asked him several questions, one of which was to explain the list of ten things, one more [أشدّ ash-shad-du] than the other, to which the Imam ﷺ replied per the passage above. When translated into English, it is not easy to determine the exact English sense of the Arabic term [أشدّ ash-shad-du]. Therefore, it is better to deduce its meaning from the context of the Imam ﷺ's explanation itself, per the following translation:

As for the list of ten things, one [أشدّ ash-shad-du] than the other, first [consider] the [أشدّ ash-shad-du] things that Allah has created are rocks. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than rocks is iron, because it can break/shatter/pulverize rock. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than iron is fire, because it can melt iron. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than fire is water. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than water are clouds. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than clouds is the wind that carries/transports/moves those clouds around. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than the wind is the angel that circulates it. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than that angel is the angel of death who will cause that angel to die. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than the angel of death is the death that will kill off the angel of death. [أشدّ ash-shad-du] more than that death is the command of Allah that will annihilate that death.

In the above passage, the Imam ﷺ describes a scenario where, ultimately, nothing other than Allah ﷺ, the Omega, remains after everything has ceased to exist. There is no Dasein component. Also, Allah ﷺ Himself cannot be considered a Dasein, as will be proven in what follows in our discussion later on.

The "clear the table" exercise above is meant to assist achieve a state of Muslim Dasein, and help us along, during our lives, to understand the reality in which we, as Muslims, find ourselves. Imam Hasan ﷺ's explanation shows, in a much more rational and rock-solid way, what secular existential philosophers, particularly in contrast to the Imam ﷺ's explanation, seem to have disregarded: the existence of Allah ﷺ, God.

So, the distinction between a secular understanding of Dasein versus that of a Muslim understanding of Dasein, becomes that, where a secular existentialist sees "the Nothing," for Muslim existentialists, the (Muslim) Dasein, based on the Holy Quran and the teachings of the Masoomeen ﷺ, finds itself *in the presence of Allah ﷺ*.

Of course, there has to be great care exercised at this point, per the traditions of the Masoomeen ﷺ, and per the verses of the Holy Quran, so as not to bring the Sublimity of Allah ﷺ down to the level of man by erroneously ascribing the limitations of human existence and experience to Him ﷺ. For this reason, it cannot be said that the notion of Dasein also applies to Allah ﷺ Himself just the way it does to man.

This is because to do so would be to equivocate and bring Allah ﷺ, the Sublime, down to the level of His creation, man, which is a big no-no in Islam as it is deemed [شرک idolatry; associating a partnership with Allah ﷺ], the greatest unforgivable transgression possible in Islam. Allah ﷺ is infinite and not composed of any parts, nor can He ﷺ be divided into “sections” nor be manifested as smaller “entities,” per bipartite, tripartite, or poly-partite notions.

Allah ﷺ, God, is infinite in every way possible and has no equal or example, as mentioned in the Holy Quran 112:4 & 42:11:

...There is no one equal to Him...

and

...There is nothing like Him...

And it is also incorrect to think that the Muslim Dasein’s volition is what gives rise to Allah ﷺ because that would make Allah ﷺ Himself a haphazard occurrence and a byproduct of a Dasein’s volition.

The Quran and Masoomeen ﷺ prove that Allah ﷺ exists outside of the whims and wiles of human thought; that the existence of man, as well as that of all other creations, depends on Allah ﷺ, but not the other way around, as described in the Holy Quran (37:180):

...Exalted be your Lord, the Lord of Glory, above what they attribute to Him...

Therefore, to understand the correct thinking which a Muslim Dasein must adopt where Godhood is concerned, we must adhere to the guidelines, as per the above verses of the Holy Quran, and also as per the guidance of the Masoomeen ﷺ in this regard.

There are numerous sources, in addition to the entire Holy Quran, such as traditions, sermons, sayings, prayers, etc., from the Masoomeen ﷺ, all of which are directed solely at Allah ﷺ’s [وحدة Oneness]. Thus any notion of plurality, or of anything being equal in any way possible to Allah ﷺ is false, and punishable by eternal damnation. So, do not entertain even the slightest possibility of anything other than the Oneness of Allah ﷺ, particularly once you, as a Muslim have become Dasein: “Being understanding there is no Nothing, per what secular existentialists say.”

Also, as a Muslim Dasein: “Being in awe of Allah, The Sublime,” you can turn to books of prayer such as مفاتيح الجنان Mafateh alJenan, or to the books of the traditions of the Masoomeen ﷺ such as نهج البلاغة Nahjalbalaghah for essential guidance as to how to go about conducting yourself in the presence of Allah ﷺ.

Was-Salam.

Your Brother in Faith,

SMH Razvi  
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